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Feminine Sensibility as a Transformative Force in Indian Art

Anita Yadav[a]*, Dr.I.U.Khan[b]

[a] *Research Scholar,Dept. Of Drawing And Painting, University of Rajasthan,Jaipur*
[b] *Head, Supervisor,Dept. of Drawing and Painting, University of Rajasthan,Jaipur*
[a]*Email: anitayadav0377@gmail.com*

Abstract

After India's independence in 1947, the country's art world entered a period of deep change. Artists were trying to define what it meant to be "modern" and "Indian" at the same time. Groups like the Progressive Artists' Group explored bold, new styles and created a national art language that combined Indian themes with modernist approaches. But alongside this well-known path, a less talked-about but equally powerful change was happening: the rise of feminine sensibility in Indian art. This feminine sensibility wasn't just about women becoming artists or painting female figures. It was about a new way of seeing the world, one that focused on emotion, care, inner life, the body, memory, struggle, and resilience. It brought attention to subjects that had often been ignored or seen as "unimportant": the home, the daily lives of women, motherhood, pain, silence, and dreams. Many artists began using their work to question traditional roles, speak out against injustice, and reclaim the female body from being shown only as an object of beauty or desire. This article throws light on how feminine art in India helped change the way women were shown in art. It celebrated their strength, emotions, and daily lives. It questioned old ideas and opened doors for future artists to speak freely about equality and truth.

Keywords: Indian Themes, Feminine Sensibility, Modern, Indian Art.

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* Corresponding author.

Introduction

Interestingly, Indian art often reflects feminine qualities. Many sculptures and paintings show women, with soft, graceful gestures and curves. These are not just physical traits but reflect deeper cultural ideas about femininity. In Indian poetry and art, women are often shown as emotionally strong and symbolically powerful. Even though most artists were men, their works often celebrated the female form and spirit. Some scholars even describe Indian art as "female" art because of this focus on feminine beauty, grace, and emotional depth. Over time, a patriarchal society developed in India, especially after 1000 BCE. But before that, there were strong traces of matriarchal traditions, especially in tribal and rural areas. These older ideas still appear in Indian art, showing respect for women, their authority, and their emotional strength. Indian art also influenced fairy tales and folk stories. In many of these stories, women are the central characters. They might be shown as goddesses, demons, queens, or even simple village girls. These tales reflect Indian society's deep respect for women's different roles. After India got independence in 1947, Indian art started to change. Artists wanted to show a new identity for the country using modern styles but with Indian ideas. As we proceed further, we are going to witness these changes that were gradual and at the same time, impactful.

Discussion

A. Female body as a symbol of identity, emotion and strength

Many modern Indian artists have used the female body not just to show beauty, but to express deep ideas about identity, strength, and emotion. Artists like Amrita Shergil, M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, Mrinalini Mukherjee, and Ravinder Reddy each saw the female form as a powerful symbol. For them, the woman represents more than just a figure, she stands for care, creation, pride, energy, and resilience. Whether shown through bold sculptures, spiritual symbols, or abstract forms, the female body becomes a way to talk about the power of women and their role in both society and nature. These artists remind us that the body is not just physical, it carries stories, emotions, and strength that go beyond what we see on the surface.

Amrita Sher-Gil was one of the first modern Indian artists to bring feminine sensibilities into her art. This means she painted from a woman's point of view, showing real emotions, daily struggles, and the inner world of women. Her paintings often showed women not as objects to look at, but as people with deep thoughts and quiet strength. She painted ordinary village women, often sitting in silence, resting, or lost in thought. These women were not idealized or made to look glamorous. Instead, Amrita showed them as they were tired, thoughtful, sometimes lonely. This was very different from the way most artists at the time showed women. Through their eyes and posture, she captured their pain, dignity, and hidden strength. Her use of earthy colors, soft light, and calm expressions reflected a gentle, emotional view of life. She focused on themes like sisterhood, loneliness, and the quiet moments of domestic life. Paintings like *Three Girls*, *Bride's Toilet*, and *Women on the Charpai* are powerful examples of this. Amrita Sher-Gil's work was bold for her time. She used art to talk about women's lives from the inside. Her feminine approach helped open the door for later female artists to tell their own stories through their work.

M.F. Husain, one of India's most famous modern artists, often used the female body as a central part of his art. For him, the woman was not just a figure of beauty, she represented India itself, full of history, pain, power, and mystery. In many of his paintings, women are shown with bold lines, strong forms, and dramatic movements. They are part goddess, part mother, and part ordinary woman. Husain did not always show realistic details of the female face or body. Instead, he used symbolic forms like flowing hair, bare feet, or large, expressive eyes to express emotion and strength. His women could be calm and nurturing, or wild and powerful. Sometimes they were inspired by mythology, like Durga or Draupadi, and sometimes by modern Indian women, like the actress Madhuri Dixit, whom he admired for her energy and grace. Although some people have criticized Husain for objectifying women, many of his works try to celebrate their inner power and role in society. The female body in Husain's art becomes a way to talk about identity, struggle, and resilience, both personal and national. A famous example is his painting series on Mother Teresa. Instead of showing her exact face, Husain painted her with a faceless figure in a blue-bordered white sari, holding or protecting children. Her body becomes a symbol of care, sacrifice, and spiritual strength. In this way, the female body is not shown for beauty alone, it becomes a tool to express identity, love, and power.[1]

S.H. Raza, one of India's most respected modern painters, is best known for his abstract and symbolic style. Though he did not paint the female body often in a realistic or physical way like other artists, he still used feminine symbols in deep and meaningful ways, especially through nature, energy, and spiritual forms. In Raza's early works, especially during the 1950s and 60s, we see figures and landscapes where female forms represent the Earth, fertility, and life. The female body in his paintings is not always clearly visible, but it appears as curved lines, womb-like shapes, and glowing forms, symbolizing creation, emotion, and inner strength. Later in his career, Raza focused on the Bindu (dot), which he described as the source of all energy. He often connected the Bindu with Shakti, the feminine power in Indian philosophy. For Raza, the female principle represented the life force of the universe. Even without painting women directly, he honoured the female body as the heart of emotional and spiritual energy. In

this way, Raza's art uses the idea of the feminine to express identity, creation, strength, and emotion in a powerful, symbolic manner.[2]

Mrinalini Mukherjee gave the female body a bold presence, showing it as a symbol of creation, strength, and natural energy. Her sculptures do not focus on perfect beauty. They show the woman as someone who is deeply connected to nature, emotion, and spiritual power. One of her well-known works is "*Yakshi*" (1984), made of dyed hemp. The figure looks both human and goddess-like. It stands tall and proud, with flowing curves and a sense of deep stillness. It reminds us of ancient temple sculptures but with a modern, personal voice. Mrinalini's women do not need to speak, their bodies and forms express everything: identity, emotion, fertility, strength, and freedom. Through her art, she made people rethink how the female body could be seen, not as passive or decorative, but as a force of nature.

Ravinder Reddy is a well-known Indian sculptor who is famous for his large, colorful sculptures of women's heads and figures. His artworks may look bold and decorative at first, but they carry deep meaning. For Reddy, the female body is not just about beauty—it is a powerful symbol of identity, pride, and inner strength. His women often have strong features, wide eyes, and calm but confident expressions. They are inspired by rural Indian women, temple sculptures, and folk traditions. By showing them in such a big and bold way, Reddy gives them importance and respect, something that everyday women are often denied in society. The bright colors and gold paint in his work highlight their divine-like presence, making them look both modern and timeless. These women are not shy or submissive. They look straight at the viewer, as if telling their own story.Through his art, Reddy challenges how women are usually seen, not as weak or quiet, but as strong, emotional, and proud individuals. His sculptures celebrate the power, beauty, and identity of Indian women in a unique and unforgettable way.

B. Goddess Reinterpretations in Art

Many Indian artists have reimagined goddesses in their artwork, not just as religious symbols but as reflections of real women's lives. These artists use myths, stories, and traditional images to talk about the strength, struggles, emotions, and identity of women in today's world. Whether it is the gentle and poetic goddesses of Nilima Sheikh, the fierce forms of Kali in Tyeb Mehta's paintings, or the bold half-woman, half-goddess figures by Gogi Saroj Pal, each artist shows that goddesses are not just part of temples and old stories, they live on in the courage and power of everyday women. From Mrinalini Mukherjee's myth-inspired women to K.G. Subramanyan's mix of the sacred and the everyday, these artworks help us see goddesses in a new way. They remind us that female strength, care, and spirit are timeless and deeply important today.

Nilima Sheikh is an Indian artist known for her paintings that tell stories about women, history, and tradition. In many of her artworks, she reimagines goddesses not just as religious figures, but as symbols of strength, care, resistance, and beauty. She paints goddesses with a soft, poetic style, showing their deep connection to both everyday life and larger spiritual meanings. Instead of showing goddesses in typical powerful poses like in temples, Nilima often presents them as gentle, wise, and emotional figures, reflecting real women's lives, their struggles, love, and bravery. One example is her painting series "*When Champa Grew Up*", where the story of a young girl connects with the mythical and spiritual world. The goddess-like figures in these paintings seem to watch over the girl's journey. They blend myth and reality, showing how stories of goddesses still matter in women's lives today. Through these images, Nilima Sheikh gives old myths new meaning. She uses the goddess as a way to talk about female identity, trauma, protection, and power. Her art invites us to see goddesses not only as holy figures, but also as reflections of real women's courage and inner strength.

Nalini Malani combined mythological female figures like Sita (of Ramayana) and Medea (of Greek mythology) with modern cultural references, like *Mother Courage*, *Mother India*, and the concept of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). These figures were often seen in two ways, either as idealized Goddesses

or as victims during war and patriarchy. Women were shown as symbols of the nation but also as people who could be hurt, looted, or used. She imagined Sita and Medea as powerful women with deep knowledge, who were still betrayed and treated unfairly. Even Alice (from Alice in Wonderland) becomes part of this narrative as a girl whose innocence is exploited. In her artwork, the artist plays with visuals and stories to show how women's identities are twisted or misunderstood[3].

Gogi Saroj Pal is a well-known Indian artist whose work focuses on women's lives, struggles, and power. She says she doesn't just paint women but she paints the world from a woman's point of view. Her goal is to show that society is unequal and that art can help us imagine a more equal and peaceful world. Many of Gogi's artworks show women in powerful but emotional ways. Her early works often show sadness or pain that women feel in a male-dominated world. For example, her painting *Windows* (1984) shows women peeking out of drapes with fear in their eyes. Another painting, *Halley's Comet* (1986), shows women cradling babies with worry, showing how motherhood can bring both love and fear. In the late 1980s, Gogi's style changed. She started painting women as half-human and half-animal goddesses. These figures, like the *Hathyogini-Shakti* (1996), sit naked on lions or tiger skins, doing yoga.[4] They stare confidently at the viewer. These images link women to powerful goddesses like Durga, showing their strength and inner power. Gogi's art reminds us that women are not weak, they are strong, spiritual, and central to the world, like the goddess Shakti.

K.G. Subramaiayan's modern approach to cultural identity emerged in the early 1960s. As an artist of the post-Independence era, Subramanyan was more open to Western influences. He believed in blending various cultural traditions and creating a shared artistic language rich in diverse sensibilities. He worked across many mediums — textiles, murals, children's books, and toys — and this hands-on engagement helped deepen his creativity and understanding of traditional crafts. For him, his local environment was just as important as the global cultural influences. Most importantly, Subramanyan emphasized communication and pluralism in his visual culture. His paintings often reflect both secular and sacred elements together, which he saw as defining features of Indian culture. For example, in his artwork *Mahishasuramardini*, the image of Goddess Durga is shown in a way that connects mythology to everyday life. Beyond its sacredness, it also expresses a unique form of secularism, where divine presence becomes part of daily living. Subramanyan often reinterpreted goddesses not only as religious figures but also as symbols of womanhood, power, and cultural memory. His goddesses were not just warriors or divine protectors, they were reflections of real women's lives, their nurturing roles, emotional depths, and inner strength. By placing mythological goddesses into everyday settings, Subramanyan merged the past with the present and celebrated the idea that the sacred feminine lives on in ordinary women. His work reminds viewers that women carry divine power within them, making goddesses both timeless and human[5].

Tyeb Mehta was a famous modern Indian artist known for painting mythological figures like Durga and Kali, but he did not show them in traditional, decorative ways. Instead, he focused on their inner energy, raw power, and emotional intensity. For example, in his famous *Kali* series, the goddess is shown with a sharp expression, dark colors, and broken or distorted shapes. This was not to scare people, but to express the pain, anger, and strength that women often carry silently. Through these forms, Tyeb Mehta made people think deeply, not just about mythology, but about the condition of women in society. His goddesses were not soft or idealized, but strong, fierce, and real, representing the female spirit that fights against injustice. In this way, Tyeb Mehta gave ancient goddesses a new meaning, they became symbols of struggle, identity, and female power in modern times. His art connected mythology with everyday life, and reminded viewers that goddesses still exist in the courage of ordinary women.

C. Gender based inequalities---Patriarchy, Violence and Injustice

Many modern Indian artists have explored the lives, struggles, and strength of women through their art. They show the world from a woman's point of view, often using everyday symbols, traditional styles,

and powerful imagery to express deep emotions and social issues. Artists like Arpita Singh, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Vivan Sundaram, and Gogi Saroj Pal focus on themes like motherhood, fear, violence, identity, and the pressure women face in a male-dominated society. Their works highlight both the strength and vulnerability of women, questioning traditional roles and showing how women keep fighting despite many challenges. Through their unique styles and personal experiences, these artists bring women's voices to the centre of Indian art.

Arpita Singh's art reflects the world as seen through a woman's eyes. She uses symbols from her daily life like flowers, toys, phones, guns, or roads to tell stories about women's experiences. Her style is inspired by traditional crafts of rural Bengal like Kantha embroidery and Pata painting, but she adds her own modern meaning. Many of her paintings show women as strong but also vulnerable, often worried, tired, or surrounded by chaos. Arpita talks about how she paints from her life as a mother, wife, and woman. She says, "*I think like a woman, so I paint like a woman."* This shows how women's emotions, fears, and strength become central to her art. In "*Wish Dream*", women are shown sleeping, floating, or lying down in rooms filled with clocks, weapons, and other objects. These symbols represent the chaos and violence that women face in their personal and social lives. She frames her paintings to protect what's inside, but often breaks that frame, showing that women's lives are constantly under threat. Arpita does not call herself a feminist, but her work clearly speaks about the struggles and identity of women in a male-dominated world. Her recurring focus on mother-daughter relationships also shows how women pass on strength to each other across generations. In her painting *"Child Bride with Swan" (2005),* she shows a young girl dressed as a bride, with a swan beside her. This artwork quietly questions child marriage and early loss of freedom for girls in society. The girl looks confused and sad, reflecting how young girls are forced into adult roles too early.[7]

Vivan Sundaram was a modern Indian artist who used photography, installation, and mixed media to explore issues like history, identity, politics, and gender inequality. He was deeply influenced by feminism and supported women's voices through his art. One of his most important works on gender is the photo-series "*Re-take of Amrita*" (2001–2002), where he used old family photographs and digitally reworked them to include Amrita Sher-Gil, his famous aunt and a pioneer modernist painter. By reimagining her presence in different family scenes, Sundaram highlighted how patriarchal history often erases strong women. He wanted to give Amrita a central space, as a woman, an artist, and a rebel, who had been marginalized in her own family and society. Another example is his installation *"Trash*" (2008), where he created a city out of garbage. Though not only about gender, the work reflected how the urban poor, especially women, are forced to live in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. It connects poverty, gender, and social injustice.

Gogi Saroj Pal's early works like "Windows" (1984) show women peeking out from behind drapes with fearful expressions. These images suggest how women are often confined to domestic spaces and live with the fear of punishment if they step out of accepted roles. Another painting, "*Halley's Comet*" (1986), shows mothers holding babies with worried expressions, expressing the uncertainty and burden of motherhood in a world that doesn't value women's emotions

Women were the main focus in almost 80% of Bikash Bhattacharjee's artworks. He painted women from different backgrounds, some from red-light areas, others from middle-class families. Many of them were poor and trapped in the old traditions of Kolkata, while some were shown as free and independent. But all these women had one thing in common: Bikash showed their pain, struggles, and silent suffering through his art with deep understanding and empathy. One of his most powerful series about women was called "*Durga*", painted between 1988 and 1990. These were almost life-size paintings that showed his great respect for women. Bikash once said, *"Life without the appreciation of women would have been unthinkable for me."* He admired how women, despite facing so many restrictions from society, still managed to be strong, loving, graceful, and kind, the very things society expected of them. This deep

respect for women and their strength is clearly shown in his paintings.[8]

Rekha Rodwittiya emerged as a pioneering feminist and Marxist artist in Baroda in the mid-1980s. Her artistic practice is deeply rooted in her feminist beliefs, especially in opposing patriarchal structures in society and the art world. She was influenced by the Kerala Radical group, who promoted politically engaged art, and used this ideological grounding to confront and critique traditional gender roles. Women, especially anonymous and universal female figures, are central to her works. Her paintings often reflect the psychological and emotional struggles of women, particularly the violence and repression they face globally. In works like *How Naked Shall I Stand for You*, she explores female vulnerability, strength, and pain, depicting the female body as both exposed and guarded, symbolizing the complexity of womanhood. Rodwittiya integrates her personal life, struggles, and politics into her art, turning her canvas into a space of confrontation and self-expression. She consciously avoids objectifying the female body, instead using it to voice resistance and introspection. Her work merges autobiography with social critique, often using symbolic female imagery to reflect broader conditions affecting women. Despite the shift to new media by many contemporaries, Rodwittiya remained committed to painting, emphasizing its intimate yet powerful potential to connect with the viewer. She also engages actively with younger generations of artists, promoting feminist discourse and collective progress in art. Her practice blends the personal, political, and poetic, presenting a female perspective that is bold, reflective, and socially engaged.

Conclusion

The purpose of feminist art is to bring positive change and promote equality in society. Artists use many types of media, from traditional painting to modern forms like performance art, conceptual art, body art, craftivism, video, film, and fiber art. Feminist art has played a key role in changing how people think about art by using new ideas and media to offer fresh perspectives. Artists highlighted the struggles of women, domestic life, gender roles, and inequality. This helped break the silence around issues like violence, discrimination, and marginalization. Feminine perspectives redefined beauty, not as perfection but as resilience, imperfection, and emotional honesty. Women's strength was shown in survival, caregiving, and endurance, not just physical power. Female artists brought personal stories into the public space, valuing emotions and domestic experiences often ignored in mainstream art. Art based on feminine sensibilities encouraged dialogues about rights, roles, and representation, making society more aware and open to change. It gave visibility to female creators, encouraging future generations of women to express themselves without fear. As we move forward, the influence of feminine sensibilities in art will remain vital in fostering equality, celebrating diversity, and empowering future generations to imagine a world where every voice is heard, and every story matters.

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